

June 12, 2016

When to plant vegetables

I just planted the family vegetables yesterday. You name it, I grow it. Steve Zahn (American actor).

Telling northern Minnesota gardeners when to plant, given our capricious climate, is tenuous advice at best and very presumptuous on my part. So, this column is basically an exhortation to seriously consider the local conditions and an admonition to be patient about sowing dates for the vegetable garden.

After a Minnesota winter, during which car batteries and manhood are challenged, and during our yo yo springs, northern Minnesota gardeners lament, “When will real spring come?” Minnesotans who have not migrated south in the winter and labor through an interminable winter take solace in the thought that real spring will eventually come and planting vegetables can begin. The vernal equinox, a date on the calendar, awakens dormant gardening juices, often causing gardeners to sow seeds or put transplants into a hostile cold and damp soil. The result, as any anxious Minnesota gardener has experienced, is a replant, often more than once.

My mother always advised, “Never plant tomatoes before Memorial Day.” She was invariably right. By the time this column is published, conditions should be acceptable for “warm” weather but too late for some “cool” weather plants.

I am reconciled to the fact that several variables go into a planting date, most of them associated with the weather and micro climate. In past years I have faithfully followed the advice in the literature, on seed packages, and from green thumb

gardeners but have been “ambushed” on numerous occasions by unseasonable weather. Usually the norm in Minnesota. Also the information that is posted on line is usually for a warmer climate and therefore very “iffy” for northern Minnesota. Therefore any planting date is a moving target but generally the following guidelines and planting dates apply, overlaid with a modicum of common sense.

Starting with the cool season crops. First, obviously, the soil should not be too wet or too dry. When the moisture is right the soil crumbles in your hands. If it is too wet it stays molded into a ball. The planting area can then be tilled or spaded up and raked to level it. If you do this operation in the fall, it could save you some time in the spring. When is the best time in the spring to do this? Obviously it depends on the last snow or rain fall. And as every Minnesota gardener knows, the date can vary from sometime in April until the end of May.

Lets assume the weather has cooperated and all else has gone well. Lets pick an arbitrary date of April 15. The weather has warmed, the soil has dried and the gardener is keen to plant something. A caveat. These suggestions are not etched in stone but are only meant to be guidelines and many experienced gardeners have learned over the years to adjust their own planting schedule.

Asparagus crowns are a satisfying option in that you’re planting something other than a seed. Before you start planting seeds, make sure they are treated with a seed treatment fungicide to prevent “damping off”, a disease caused by soil fungi that grow very well in cool and wet soils. Prepackaged seeds are normally treated with a fungicide but seeds a gardener has saved should be treated with a commercial seed treatment fungicide, available at Bloomers.

Seeds that can be planted at this time, or a little later, are beets, carrots, horse radish, kale, leaf lettuce, onions, onion sets, peas, potatoes, radishes, rhubarb, spinach, and turnips. If one wants to grow horse radish the roots can be planted at this time. However, be aware that horse radish, if left to its own devices, will shortly become a weed and grow over a large area so unwanted plants can be “hacked” out.

Cabbage, brussels sprouts and broccoli can also be planted early but to be on the safe side it would be best to start plants inside sometime in March under grow-lights then transplant seedlings later in May. Seeds of several of these plants can also be planted later in the growing season but normally after the heat of summer has passed.

Later into May, bush, lima, and pole beans can be planted. If the soil temperatures drop, these may have to be replanted. About the middle of May or a little later, cucumbers, parsnips, pumpkin, rhubarb, rutabaga, squash, sweet corn, and watermelon can be planted. By this time soil temperatures should be warmed up but the air temperature may fluctuate several degrees from day to day. Remember, you do live in Minnesota. However, as a solace, warm soil temperatures may buffer any wild swings in air temperature so these seeds may be okay but late in germinating.

Warm season crops need a long growing season and usually will not mature if seeded directly in the garden. The parallel is cool season crops must mature before hot weather. Therefore, if a gardener does not buy these plants at Bloomers they must start crops early inside.

Start warm season crops later than cool season crops. Cool season crops would be those previously mentioned. Warm season crops that must be started inside are peppers, eggplant

and tomatoes. Peppers and eggplant tend to germinate very slowly. Make a soil mixture of two parts loam, one part sand, and one part organic matter. Fill transplant tray or peat pots with the mixture and carefully firm the soil. Sow the seed by making a 1/4 to 1/2 inch hole. Cover seeds lightly with sand, screened soil or vermiculite. Gently water and cover with a clear plastic and place in a warm room. When seedlings emerge, remove plastic and apply a tablespoon of starter fertilizer (5-10-5). Keep seedlings in direct sunlight or under a grow light.

Harden transplants by shading for a few days in a lath house or under a shade cloth and slightly withhold water. Water plants well then transplant on a cool, cloudy, windless day. After transplant apply a half cup of the starter fertilizer for each plant. One lifetime is never enough to accomplish one's horticultural goals. If a garden is a site for the imagination, how can we be very far from the beginning? Francis Cabot Lowell (19th century American businessman).

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